MMOZine

ISSUE 42 | SEPTEMBER 2012

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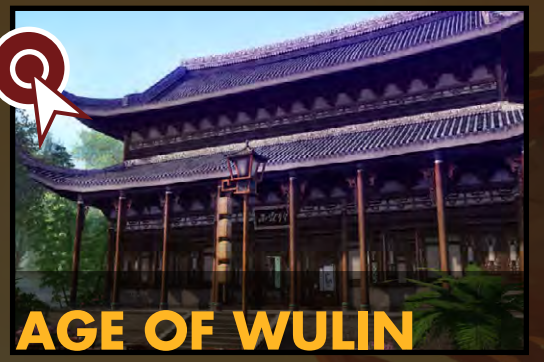
EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW!

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: MISTS OF PANDARIA



AGE OF WULIN

CITY OF HEROES

PLANETSIDE 2

GUILD WARS 2

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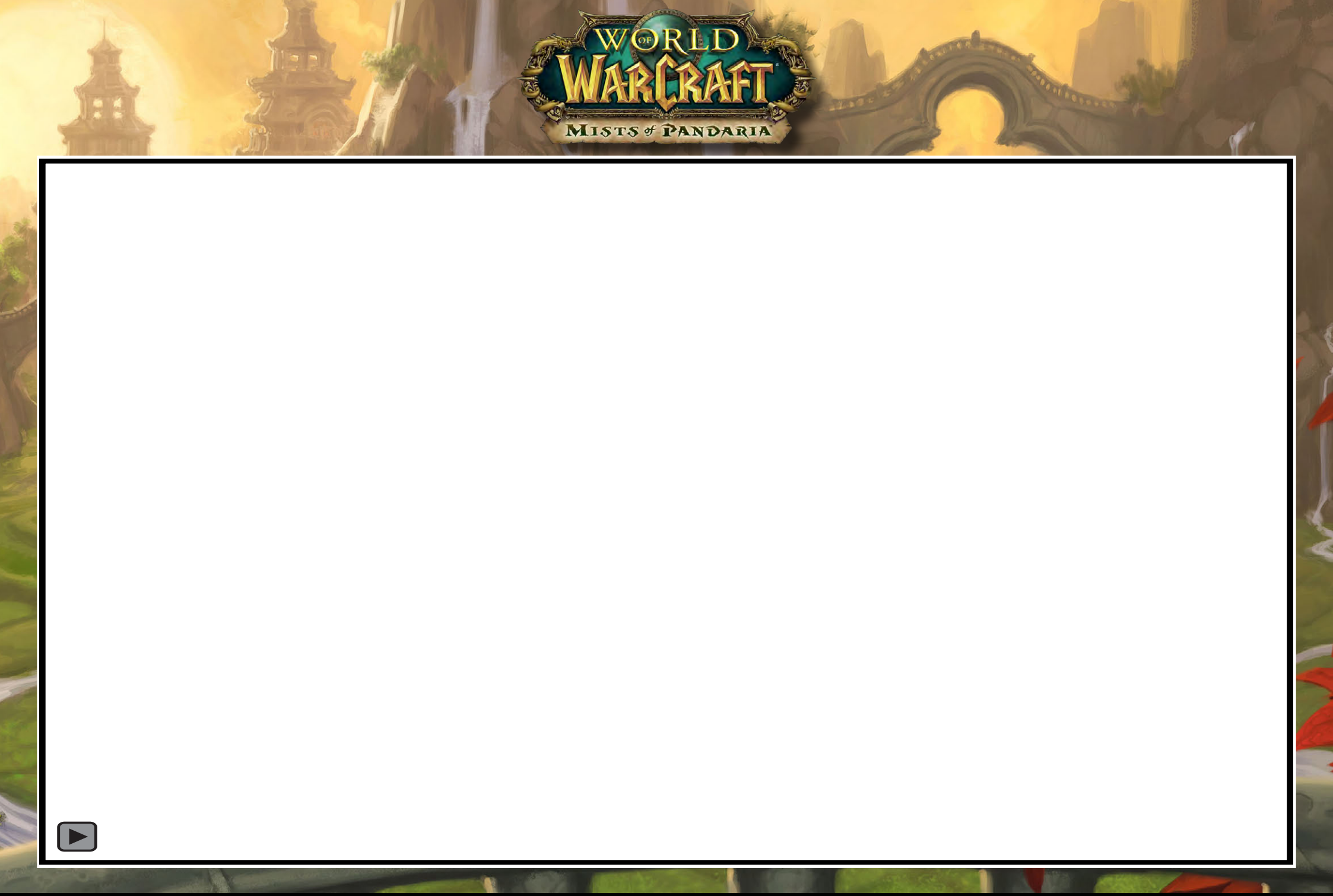

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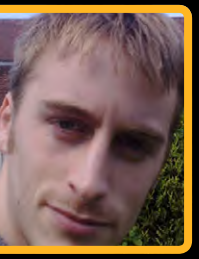

If anyone ever tells you that MMO development is in decline, do us a favour and print off these pages and rub them right into their uninformed face. Right in there! As the truth is MMOs aren't in decline they're damn well flourishing.

The recent release of *Guild Wars 2* proved that gamers the world over are hankering for new online adventures, they just need a developer to give them the right kind of push. Undoubtedly ArenaNet has done that, check our fact-laden review for proof of that, but on the horizon we also have two fantastically brave and bulky expansions for both *RIFT* and *World of Warcraft*. Two games which are sticking doggedly to the subscription-only model, while the world around them seeks new revenue opportunities via free-to-play.

Our only hope is that in this rush to embrace new trends, we don't forget the games that got us here in the first place, like the venerable *City of Heroes*. That MMO may soon be gone, but memories of our adventures in Paragon City will last a lifetime.

Enjoy the issue!

Andy Griffiths, Editor
mmozine@gamerzines.com

Don't miss! *This month's highlights!*

QUICK FINDER

Marvel Heroes
World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria
Planetside 2
Age of Wulin
Guild Wars 2
City of Heroes

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MARVEL HEROES

PUB: GAZILLION ENTERTAINMENT
DEV: IN-HOUSE
ETA: END OF 2012

FIRST LOOK

All the heroes you love in one game...

Marvel has created over eight thousand different heroes and villains over the years. That's a lot of fiction to get involved with, even for an MMORPG, but Gazillion Entertainment aren't intimidated by including the likes of Spider-Man, Daredevil and Squirrel Girl (seriously, she's a character) into one unified experience.

Gazillion themselves are resided over by David Brevik, known more commonly as one of the co-founders of Blizzard North who in turn made the *Diablo* series, so this guy knows what makes a great RPG tick. Take one look at the screenshots and you'll see Brevik's history shining through with fast-paced combat and a camera angle which is ever so slightly tilted.

The only game that has really made the most of utilising the Marvel license is *Marvel Ultimate Alliance*, and it seems as though this free-to-play release is following the same kind of template, with players assuming the role of any hero they wish in a world which boasts key locations from the comicbook maker's universe including the Hell's Kitchen, the Savage Land and Xavier's institute for the gifted. New York in particularly is going to be pretty full with the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man and Daredevil running amok, among others.

Marvel Heroes is a free-to-play game, so there will be microtransactions involved (for instance character unlocks, costume unlocks and special abilities), but currently a lot of the finer details are unclear. At this stage in the game's development that's only natural and we're sure more of that will become clear as the game enters Closed Beta in October.

Even if Marvel Heroes isn't the best kind of online experience in the world, we're excited to see what narrative will be used to pool all these heroes together, and if nothing else it will be entertaining to see the coolest superheroes and villains on the planet together in a game. Fingers crossed for Thanos. ■

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INCOMING

HOT NEWS FROM THE MMO WORLD!

CLICK EACH GAME FOR MORE INFO

CITY OF HEROES

PUB: NCSOFT
DEV: PARAGON STUDIOS

NCsoft giveth and then they taketh away. Last month saw the arrival of the world's biggest sequel, *Guild Wars 2*, and only a matter of days later it was confirmed that *City of Heroes* would be closing. Nothing like spoiling your own chalice, eh? Paragon Studios immediately ceased operations, apart from a few skeleton staff, and the future of what is undoubtedly the best superhero game on the planet was cast into doubt. Read our thoughts of this shocking sequence of events later in this issue.

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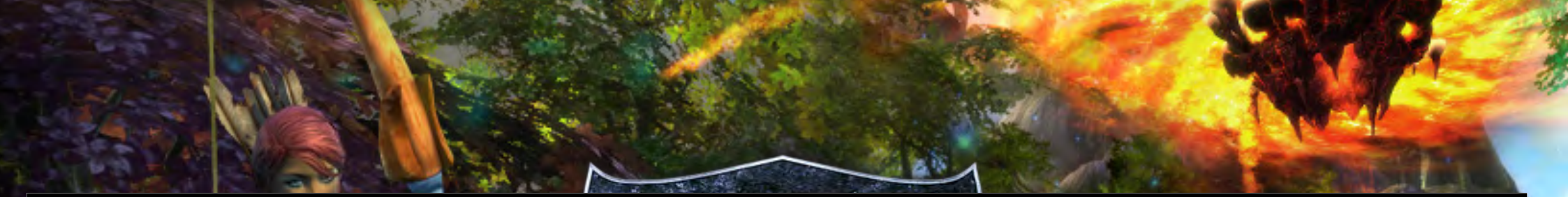

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WORLD OF WARCRAFT: MISTS OF PANDARIA

INTERVIEW

PUB: ACTIVISION BLIZZARD
DEV: BLIZZARD
ETA: SEPTEMBER 25TH

BIO

Lead Encounter Designer Ion Hazzikostas, aka Watcher, joined Blizzard in 2008 and he's in charge of overseeing the creation of the *WoW*'s dungeon and raid content.

Fluffy but deadly. We quiz Blizzard on their cutest expansion yet

Look at that big burly fella up there. The Pandaren may be cute and cuddly, but as Azeroth's oldest race, they're as far removed from comedic relief as an MMO archetype can get. At least that's the message we received loud and clear during an interview with Blizzard's Ion Hazzikostas, who was more than happy to wax lyrically about the joys of crafting a continent never seen before in *Warcraft*'s fiction, and how *WoW* is in a very healthy state indeed. Here's how our chat went down…

Why should gamers be excited to play as a Pandaren?

The Pandaren race is one that has a long history in *Warcraft* lore, going all the way back to the *Warcraft 3* RTS expansion, where you had a neutral hero; a Pandaren Brewmaster. It's a race we wanted to introduce to *WoW* for a long time, the Pandaren were very nearly actually the Alliance race in *The Burning Crusade* expansion. It could have been Pandaren and Blood Elves, but we decided to go with the Draenei there, because they were a better fit for the Outland-focused story we were trying to tell.

We've really been waiting for an opportunity to revisit and introduce them. The Pandaren fit the story we're trying to tell in *Mists of Pandaria*, as it's a return to the roots of *World of Warcraft* – all about exploration and discovery. Exploring this continent that was shrouded in this mist, only to be revealed by the cataclysm, and a noble people caught in the middle of a struggle between the Alliance and the Horde.

It doesn't seems like you're going for the same kind of serious tone that has been present in the other expansions, as the Pandarens seem more ripe for comedy asides then perhaps other races…

I agree with that a bit, but the Pandaren aren't actually really a comedy hit. We've had other races in the history of the game that are there for comedic relief. In the *Mists*

> ***THE ABILITY TO JUST JUMP RIGHT IN AND PICK UP WHERE YOU LEFT OFF IS GREATER THAN EVER BEFORE***

of Pandaria, you're going to look more to groups like The Vermin who are a race of angry rabbits, or Forest Hozen, who are monkey people. There's definitely quite a lot of silliness there, and obviously you have the occasional drunken Brewmaster, but their primary function isn't comedic relief.

Having a dedicated Healer class is something many MMO developers are moving away from, but the Pandaren are well known for their healing and Monk-like qualities. Was there ever any plans to do anything different with that race/class combination?
I think you can say that it's traditional, but it's a system that has worked well for us, and it's one we've designed a lot of really cool content around. It's one that lends itself well to co-operation, which is one of the core parts of MMO PvE gameplay – where you have a Healer that's supporting the Tank, who is protecting the Healer, who's helping the damage dealers. At the same time we understand that it's important to have flexibility. That's why the Monk is a hybrid class, they can both do damage, tank and heal depending on your choice. When you have a group of friends it's easier if certain people can adapt to fill whatever role is needed in the moment, rather than being stuck doing just one thing.

Whenever a new expansion is released for *WoW*, a considerable portion of players come back to the game having not played for a long time. How do you address that challenge?
When designing the expansion and crafting its content we try to appeal to all types of players, including the hardcore veteran who has never stopped that's just looking to jump into the newest hardest Raid zones – we have 18 Raid bosses waiting for them at max level – but at the same time there are features for all players, all play styles.

One thing which will make the game more welcoming for returning players is the new talent system. Initially some people may look at it and ask, 'What happened to the talent system? Where are the trees? There's just six rows of three choices!' But one of the main points of feedback we got about the old talent system was that it was incredibly overwhelming for returning players. We tended to wipe your talent choices with major patches and expansions, so for somebody who hadn't played for a while they'd come back and have virtually no abilities. Then they'd bring up their talent trees and have eight different icons to look at, read through, figure out what's changed and so forth.

Now a lot of the core abilities are of certain spec – if you're used to playing Arms Warrior, you'll walk out as a Warrior, spec Arms and then you'll get Mortal Strike. You'll get the things you're used to having, and then you can branch out and add a utility, but the ability to just jump right in and pick up where you left off is greater than ever before.

You've already alluded to the expansion's new Raid content, so what can players expect with that?
There are three Raid zones, the Mogu'shan Vaults which is a repository of ancient knowledge of the Mogu empire that ruled over the continent of Pandaria thousands of years before the present day.

The Raids are divided into two mini-tiers, and shortly after the release of the expansion the Mogu vaults zone will open up. That has six bosses which ›

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> ***WE'RE BOTH TALKING ABOUT AND MAKING THE NEXT CONTENT PATCHES, AS WELL AS PLANNING THE NEXT EXPANSION***

will be available on normal mode right away, and the 'Looking For Raid' mode the week after.

A few weeks later the second tier of Raids opens, which consist of The Heart of Fear and The Terrace of Endless Spring. That's about the Mantid Empire, which are an insectoid race which lives behind the wall which divides Pandaria. Trouble is brewing there and they're being corrupted by the Sha of Fear, so you need to go into the heart of their fortress and deal with that. There are a total of ten bosses and that'll be accessible four weeks after the Mogu raid. It's tuned to be harder, it drops better loot and the expectation is that the players are preparing themselves by doing the Mogu raid to be ready for the Sha.

Does the new challenge mode feature in Raids at all?

The challenge mode is just for dungeons at this point, not Raids. It's an additional difficulty above Heroic for our five-player dungeons. Once you've defeated Heroic, you can go in there with your friends and try to set a record time in a harder version of the dungeon with more challenging enemies, more damage dealt and often additional mechanics and abilities.

Where our normal and Heroic dungeons are tailored for random groups, challenge mode dungeons are a throwback to the *Burning Crusade* dungeons where the expectation is that you're going in there with four friends or guildees. You can't queue for it, you have to go to the dungeon and form a traditional group and go in. By doing that we're able to stress that core MMO group gameplay like crowd controlling, protecting the Healer etc.

What we find really interesting about challenge mode is that character gear gets normalised in the dungeon so that a level playing field is maintained for that run. How exactly has that been done?

That was new tech that our programmers were able to provide for us. If you walk into any zone with gear that's better than the 'Blues' you'd get from the Heroic dungeon, then your stats are scaled down. We have a system in place that preserves certain stats, like Hit, to make sure that players who were at the Hit cap with their previous gear don't zone in and discover that their attacks miss all the time and have a worse gameplay experience as a result.

The intent is ultimately that we can define a challenge, reward that challenge with prestigious titles, mounts and unique sets of armour. We want to make sure that challenges remain consistent, even if you play the scenario months down the line.

It must have been nice to design a continent which players had never seen in the *Warcraft* universe before…

One of the challenges and really enjoyable factors of creating this expansion is that we've been free to imagine a world of our own. For a lot of the previous expansion content, we were creating locations that had been depicted before in the RTS games, so the players had preconceived ideas of what it was supposed to look like. Here, while of course the Pandaren has a history, we were free to imagine the continent of Pandaria, as this land of wonder.

***City of Heroes* and *WoW* both came out in 2004, the former is now shutting its doors while the latter is absolutely flourishing. Obviously *WoW* being closed is a long way off at this point, but do you have any thoughts about what that might be like when the time comes or how Blizzard will go about it?**

I think it's something that's so remote and far off at this point, that it isn't part of our active thoughts or discussions. We have millions of fans that are excited about the new content we're about to release.

On our end we're both talking about and making the next content patches, as well as planning what the next expansion is going to be after this. We really have no plans to let up any time in the foreseeable future, and as long as our fans keep playing the game we will continue to make content for them to enjoy. ■

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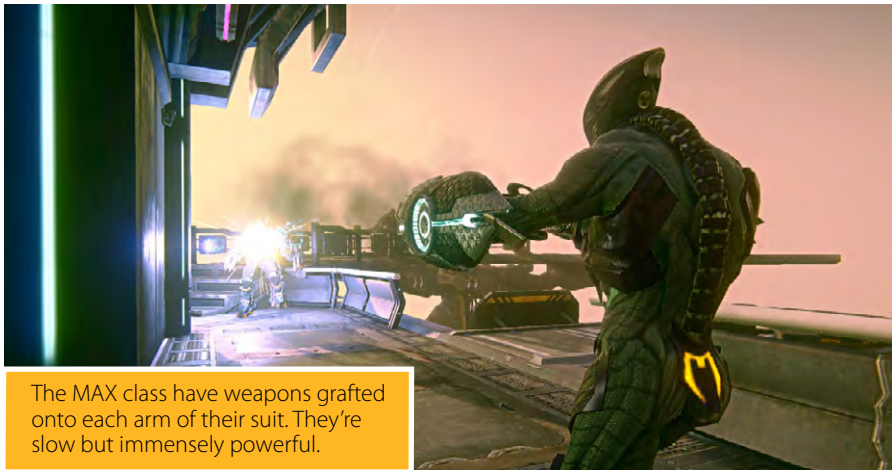

The MAX class have weapons grafted onto each arm of their suit. They're slow but immensely powerful.

PLANETSIDE 2

HANDS-ON

PUB: SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT
DEV: IN-HOUSE
LAST GAME: DC UNIVERSE ONLINE
ETA: 2012 (currently in Beta)

The joys of organised chaos...

There's something undeniably old school about SOE's next big online effort. The persistent first-person action multiplayer shooter doesn't have any NPCs, any kind of progressive plot or even a worthwhile tutorial to explain its existence – instead it just simply is. An arena which can cater for hundreds of players on giant hundred kilometre maps with three factions fighting for control over territory on a beautiful planet in a sci-fi future.

The original *Planetside* was a little bit before our time, so we didn't have any preconceived notions of what this sequel actually was, but really that didn't matter as 10 minutes in we were hitching rides on flying APCs tailored for 16 people, sniping enemies from afar before cloaking into the background and spawning our own custom tanks to get to the action faster. It might be because we've played plenty of online shooters before, but we immediately took to *Planetside 2*.

Even for an MMOFPS, the gameplay is brutally fast paced, with dedicated servers ensuring that your projectiles head to where they should, and the easy to understand map in your HUD, letting you know exactly where the big battles are taking place and can easily commute there. As the

TWITTER

@j_smedley
We've had over 1 Billion shots fired already during the Beta.

@twitchtv
Now that the Planetside 2 Beta NDA has lifted, check out all our live broadcasts.

@sips_
i'm just installing the planetside 2 Beta, OH BOY

@notch
In a galaxy in Planetside 2. I'm "xNotch". :D

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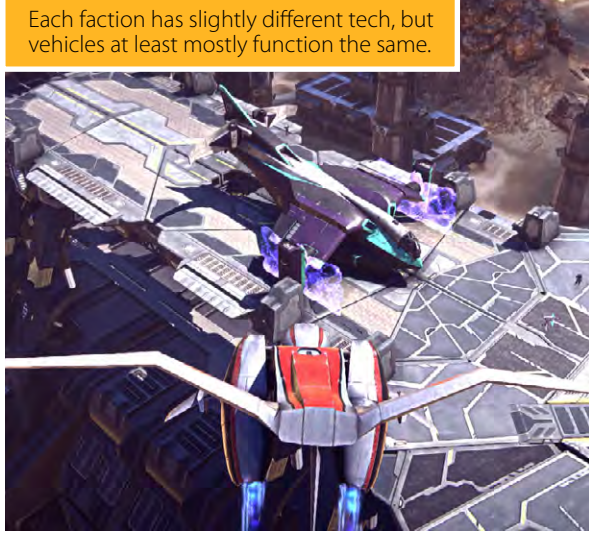
Spawn spots in bases are protected by force fields, so spawn camping is mostly eliminated – at least until you step out of the door.

Air supremacy is just as important as that on the ground.



Each faction has slightly different tech, but vehicles at least mostly function the same.

environments are so large, vehicles are an absolute must to get around, but every 30 minutes or so you can bypass that annoyance and go for a Hotspot spawn, which drops you right into a battle hotspot (symbolised by explosions on the map), via a orbital drop-pod.

PLAYING TOGETHER

Planetside 2's greatest asset is its ability to clump players together in order to make grand battles on the scale of the Normandy Landings, a regular enough occurrence for you to keep playing. Being part of these massive skirmishes as buggies speed past you and tanks clunkily aim for each other, while grand dogfights take place overhead is the stuff MMO gaming used to aim for, and the Forge Light engine manages the carnage without a groan or chugging.

We've seen as many as 100 players all fighting over ownership on one point on the map, yet there hasn't been any increased lag or stuttering – for a sequel as beautiful and latency intensive as this game is, that's mighty impressive. It's these kinds of moments where *Planetside 2* comes into its own, battles where you feel like a tiny component of a much bigger push back against an enemy which is just as numerous and committed as you and your allies. Those moments of heroism,

> *"This simulated war concept has been tried before, but never on this scale"*

be they reviving an ally or saving a friend from a squad of enemy ambushers, stick with you and keep you entertained until the next big battle begins to establish itself.

The frontlines are always changing as factions gain ownership over different hexagonal quadrants on the map, by invading a facility and staying around a central point long enough for ownership to switch, but there's usually a couple of battle hotspots taking place at one time.

This simulated war concept has been tried before, but never on this scale and never with this attention to detail, as *Planetside 2*'s other big strength is its customisation system. Rather than just 'speccing' out your soldier, who can switch between Infiltrator, Light Assault, Combat Medic, Engineer, Heavy Assault and the mechanised Max role at will,

Hotspots are indicated on the map via exclamation marks – spawn there at your peril.

Each vehicle has its own in-cockpit view, and most are easy enough to control.

players can also customise their vehicles with the same amount of minuscule tweaking.

Weapons can be switched out and new combat modules can be added to increase speed, tweak durability or change functionality. To do this you just head to the vehicle kiosk, choose your mechanical monstrosity of choice, fiddle with a few toggles and roll out. Again it's a simple system, but one that means each vehicle should be subtly different from one another. This kind of depth is vital as it adds an extra tactical element to vehicular battle, although each of the game's factions have their own roster of equipment and expertise.

Thankfully there's the ability to create characters for each faction – the well-funded Terran Republic, mysteriously powerful Vanu Sovereignty and the likeable New Conglomerate scroungers – so you can find a spec that suits you.

Match this depth with classes which all have their own skill tree – dubbed certifications – which unlock new abilities, gear and weaponry, and you have an MMOFPS where the number of different customisation aspects are

> *"Why did I die? What did that last guy have? What is the best class for this situation?"*

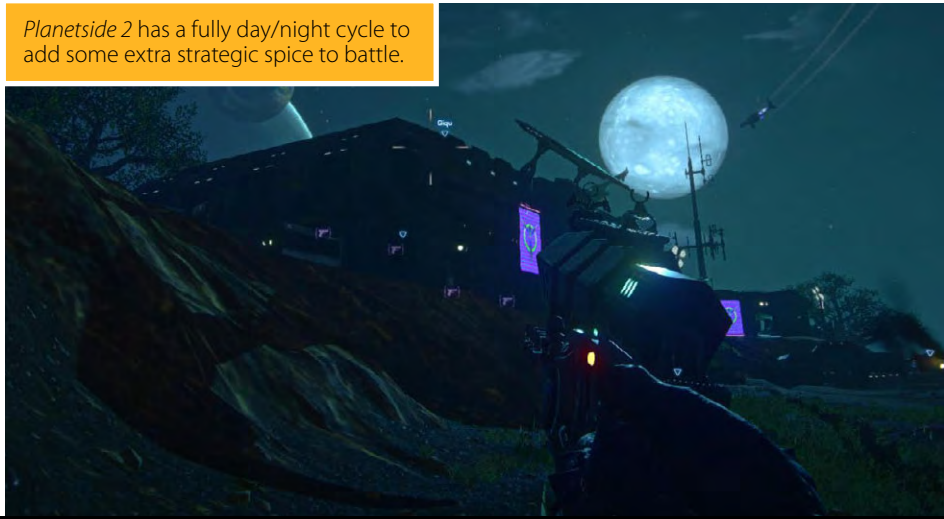
so finely tweaked that any player regardless of rank has a set of subtle, yet defined, strengths and weaknesses. This depth is what makes the game stay interesting, as that grand battle narrative gives way to constant strategic obsession; Why did I die? What build did my killer have? What is the best class for this situation?

After spending a weekend with *Planetside 2* we can see why some older MMO gamers out there are so excited about its return. However we're a bit concerned with the real cash in-game shop, as it still isn't implemented into the current build.

That in itself isn't a problem, but SOE need to be careful that the wares which require actual cash to buy, don't neuter the progression structure too much or make those willing to part with money more powerful than those who aren't. Sony have a good record in this regard, but it's clear there's still plenty of balancing still to be done.

We really hope they get the balance right, as *Planetside 2* has all the makings of a genuine online phenomenon. A fresh voice in an MMO landscape that needs innovation arguably now more than ever. From what we played over a very enjoyable weekend, *Planetside 2* seems to be exactly that. ■

Planetside 2 has a fully day/night cycle to add some extra strategic spice to battle.



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AGE OF WULIN DEMOED

PUB: GPOTATO EU
DEV: SNAIL GAMES
LAST GAME: MINISTRY OF WAR
ETA: 2012

QUICK QUOTES

"This free-to-play effort has already taken China by storm, and if gPotato get their substantial localisation duties right there's no reason why Age of Wulin can't be as popular in Europe as well."

TWEET US @GAMERZINES

Enter the Dragon

Like China itself, *Age of Wulin* is a game that doesn't go along with Western precedent, but you know what? We're absolutely fine with that, as despite enjoying where MMORPGs have gone over the years, we're still hankering for a studio of considerable size and wealth to imprint the genre with new ideas, principles and philosophies. That's exactly where Snail Games come in, as this free-to-play effort has already taken China by storm, and if gPotato get their substantial localisation duties right then there's no reason why *Age of Wulin* can't be as popular in Europe as well.

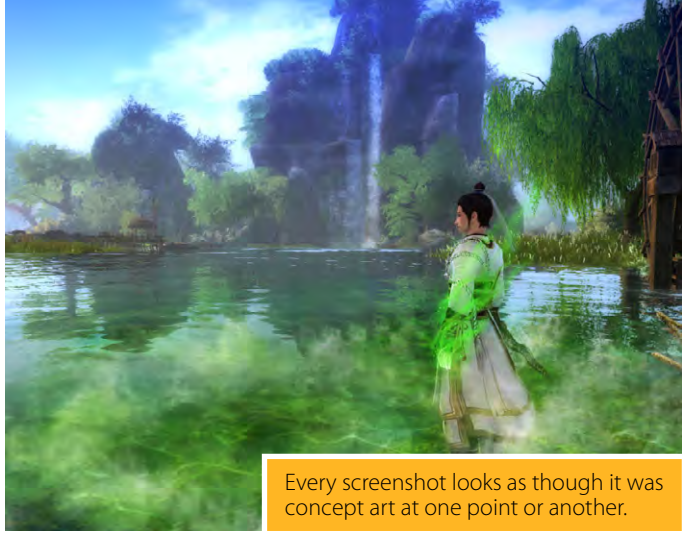
That's a bold claim to be sure, but *Age of Wulin* boasts a few stand-out features which should make developers fundamentally rethink whether they're approaching this online gaming lark properly. What are they you ask? Well stop interrupting for two bloody seconds and we'll tell you.

Age of Wulin seeks to emulate the sort of themes you'd expect to find in *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* with a world set in ancient medieval China during the Ming Dynasty. This melding of fantasy and historical concepts leads to combat where warriors are able to run on water and jump buildings in a single bound, yet this mythical game-world still has a healthy dose of reality with a host of different crafting careers available to the player from mining to smithing.

This novel setting feeds directly into *Wulin*'s progression system which is classless and level-less. All players are able to train their character down any of the game's 17 different professions – both violent and non-violent. You could become a blacksmith and make your own weapons, or learn calligraphy and inspire others to be better fighters with your art. This setting has been explored before in MMORPGs, most notably with *Guild Wars: Factions*, but *Age of Wulin* has a much more sandbox structure.

We were told that the combat system will rely purely on skill use, with time invested in a particularly skill tree not always promising success. That sort of philosophy hasn't been seen in this kind of

Age of Wulin looks beautiful, but like a lot of other MMORPGs from the East, the PC specifications aren't too demanding.



Every screenshot looks as though it was concept art at one point or another.

game for a while, but it should lend itself well to compelling PvP bouts, as it's impossible to glean the strength of a team, their skills or how long they've been playing when you first get into the ring with them, as there's no level there to reference.

THE LONE WARRIOR

It isn't all about the social experience though, as *Wulin* has hundreds of different quests, seven different factions, or sects, to ally yourself with and a comprehensive reputation system which should lead to different quests unlocking in accordance with moral decisions you've made previously.

The really crazy thing though, and the feature that has us most excited, is that when players stop controlling their character, he or she will continue to exist in the game-world – only they'll be controlled by an AI. There won't be any way for players to schedule activities for their persona once offline, and when they log back in they may find that the AI has completed some menial activities for them, trained in a few more skills or gotten themselves kidnapped by a rival sect or player clan. That may sound frustrating, but to us it sounds like the coolest feature as it gives an element of frailty to every single player on the servers, regardless of their weapons, armour or skills, and that component coupled with the skill-less progression system – where nobody knows how strong somebody is when they meet them – should result in an uneasiness and a platform which is ripe for telling fantastic stories much like *EVE Online*.

> *"When players stop controlling their character, he or she will continue to exist in the game-world"*

Like a true sandbox, *Age of Wulin*'s greatest stories won't be what the developers produce, instead it'll be tales of what the community has been up to and that's very exciting. Snail Games and gPotato have already put a video editor into the game too, so instead of just hearing about this stories players should be able to see them in all their glory. There's plenty more to find out about this ambitious game and some of its features prompt more questions then answers, but that doesn't mean we aren't excited to learn more. ■

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GUILD WARS 2

New Tyria, new game, new rules...

ROLL OVER FOR INFO!

PUB: NCSOFT
DEV: ARENANET
LAST GAME: GUILD WARS: EYE OF THE NORTH
ETA: OUT NOW

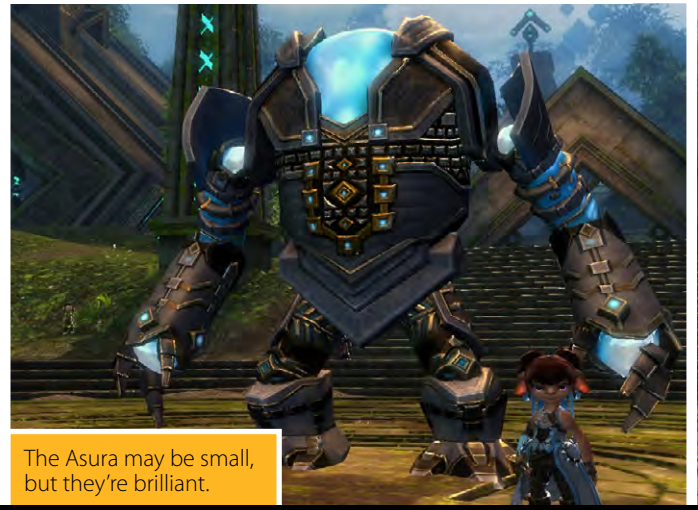
When the original *Guild Wars* arrived in 2005, journalists like ourselves swooned at its new take on the MMORPG. Shirking aside the traditional approach of massive worlds populated with players, and replacing them with instanced areas only linked via public hubs gave the game an undeniably intimate feel, as if you and your team of other players really were a rare breed of heroes seeking to win back Tyria from the evil and the corrupt. It seems like another life since we left Prince Rurik to his demise in *Prophecies*, as even though *Guild Wars 2* shares the same label as its predecessor, in terms of structure and storytelling it couldn't be more different.

For the sequel, ArenaNet has abandoned that intimacy and reliance on grouping. Aside from story quests and dungeons, the instancing of old is a distant memory as now the game relies heavily on a public questing system similar to *RIFT*. Now all of the over-world is interlinked, and rather than having an army of NPCs to collect your XP earning duties from by clicking on their exclamation-mark laden heads, activities simply arrive on your HUD with the required completion criteria, as if quest givers have been given a megaphone to advertise their problems.

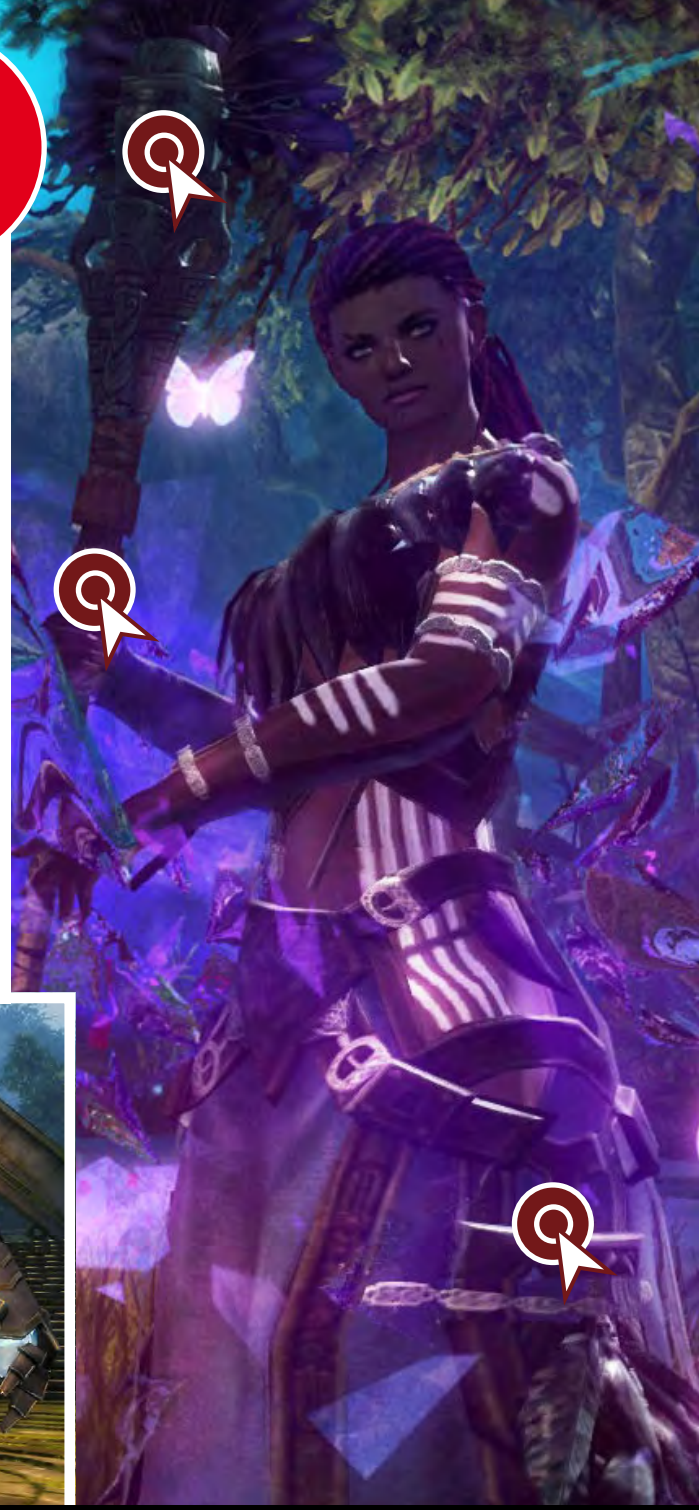
At first this takes a lot of getting used to, as we really used to enjoy the fun little quests and their associated dialogue produced in the first game, and here the Heart structure seems to encourage that tick-box completionist mentality of 'do the job, kill the bad guy, earn the XP and move on'. Admittedly we're being a little unfair as these sorts of quests usually have a multitude of different ways to be completed, and some are actually quite puzzle-like. For instance, catching insects to feed cows, only for certain bovine to prefer specific creepy crawlies, or answering riddles to win favour with a particular warrior.

Every area in Tyria has lots of these Heart quests to accomplish, as well as skill point tests, Vista Points to discover high above certain landmarks and other nice little touches to encourage exploration. This part of the game we absolutely love, as from

You won't be short of character customisation options.



The Asura may be small, but they're brilliant.



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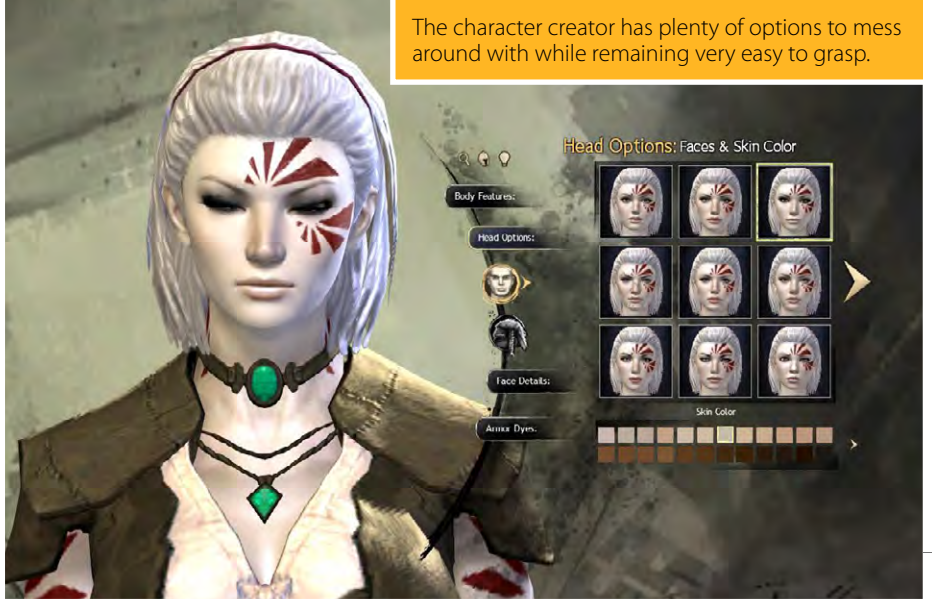
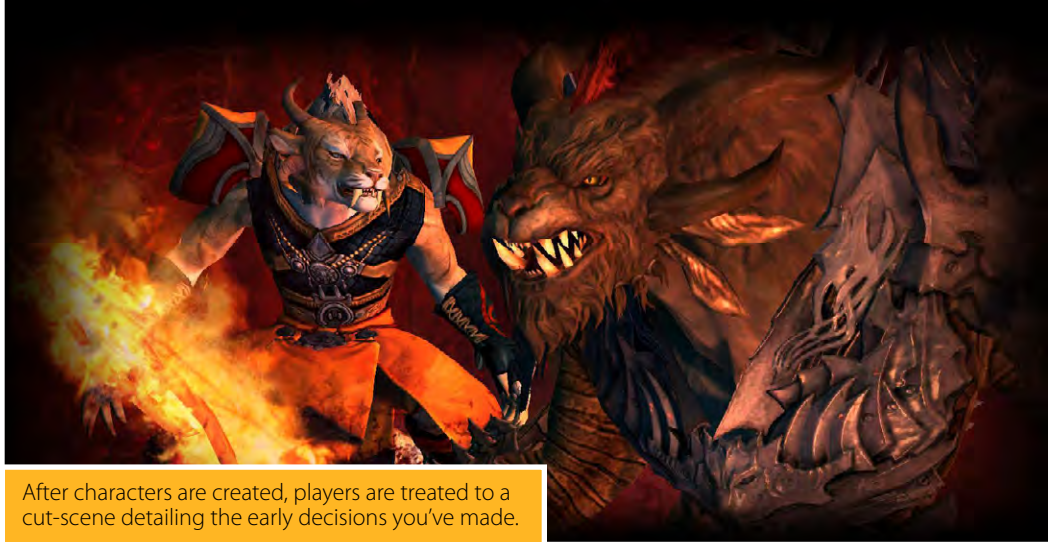
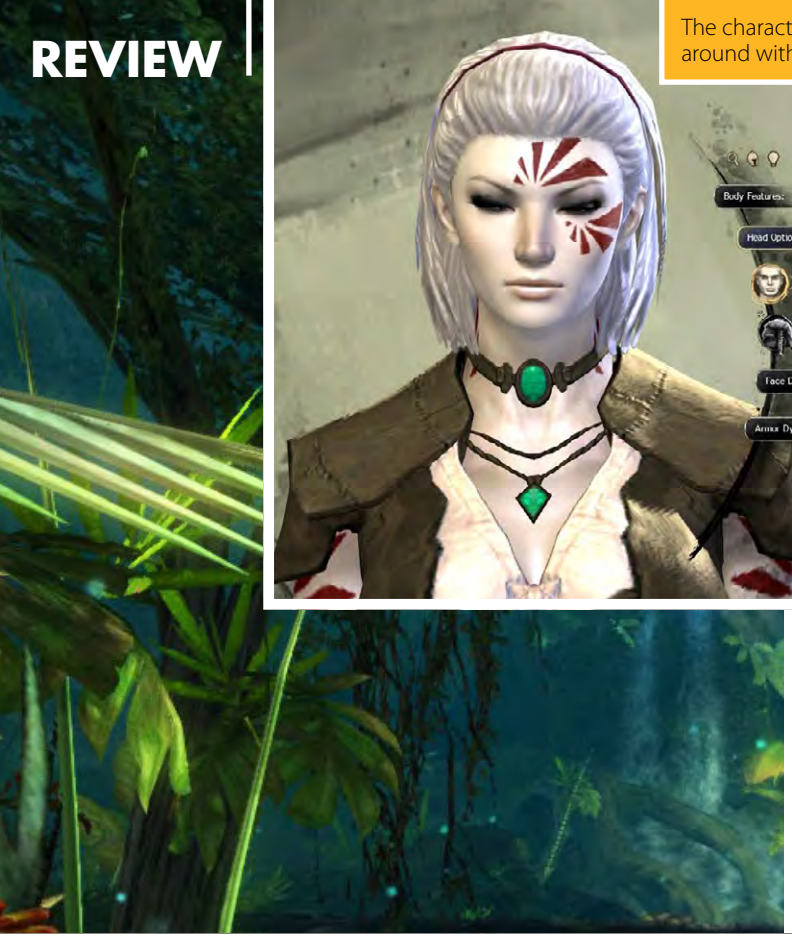


The character creator has plenty of options to mess around with while remaining very easy to grasp.



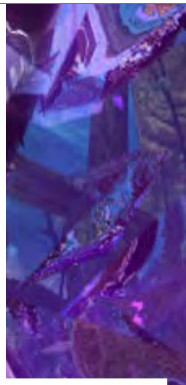
After characters are created, players are treated to a cut-scene detailing the early decisions you've made.



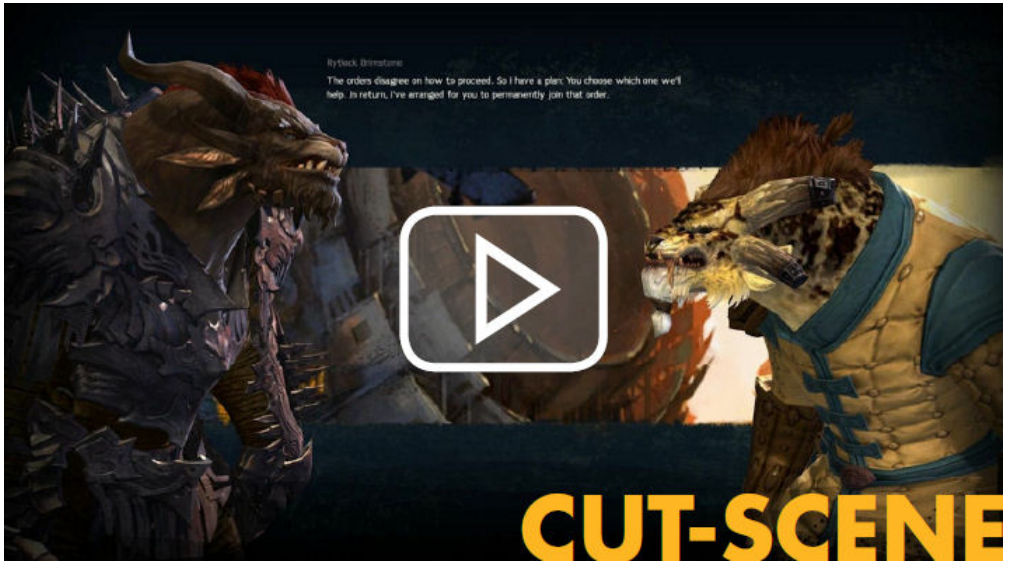
an explorer's point of view, Tyria 2.0 is a much more interesting place to visit than its previous incarnation – simply because there's so much to see and do in the gameworld. The care and attention paid to each area is clear to see, whether you're talking about the ice cold wastes of the Snowdon Drifts to the harsh landscapes of the Charr.

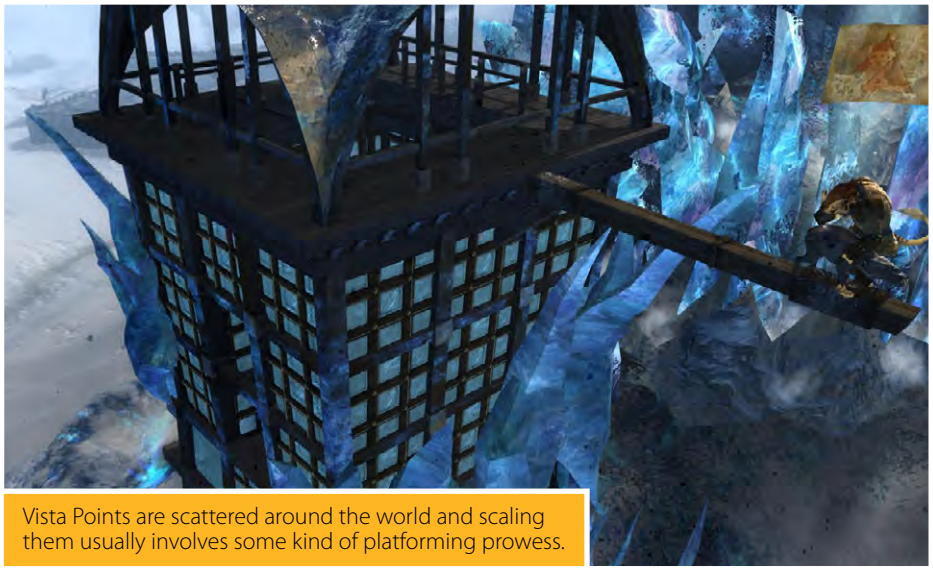
A lot of gamers talk about the believability of *Guild War 2*'s environment design, but honestly we don't buy that. NPCs mostly stay in the same spot and aside from cycled public events, the landscape doesn't really change much. No, what ArenaNet has really got right is the richness of the world. Every area feels as though it has its own sense of character and atmosphere, as well as an urgency of a story to tell via interactive objects like statues, signs and buildings to portray the events which have led to this area being the way that it is. The questing areas are the perfect embodiment of this, with different gradients and architecture which make the landscape seem as far away from sparse as you can possibly imagine. In MMOland that's a massive achievement and a huge step up from the first game. Hell, it's a huge step up from the majority of other online-only games out there.

Each of the race's capital cities on the other hand, are much more confusing to get around, especially humanity's bloated new home Divinity's Reach, which is bordering on sadism in terms of approachability, but even that area gives a sense of its history. The giant metropolis is an idealised version of Victorian London overburdened with people, yet when you forget about its scope its a

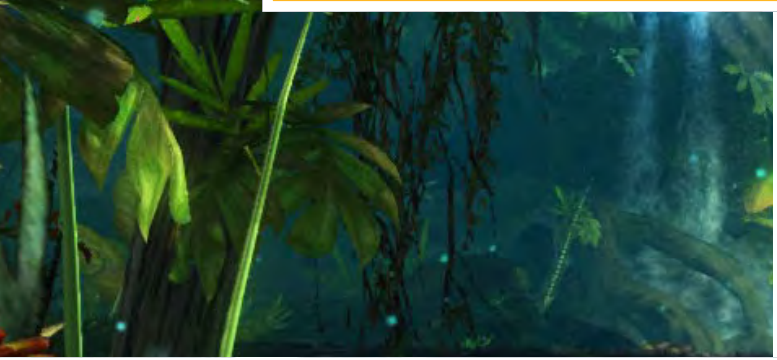


Characters don't immediately keel over when their HP runs out. Instead they enter a downed state where they can still attack the enemy for a short while, and if they can bag a kill then they recover instantly.





Vista Points are scattered around the world and scaling them usually involves some kind of platforming prowess.



From a fidelity perspective, *Guild Wars 2* isn't the best game out there, but artistically its environments are second to none.

'SUP SYLVARI

The Sylvari are the newest race to hit the continent of Tyria and haven't been seen before in either *Guild Wars* or its litany of expansions. Needless to say, expectations were high about the race before gamers got to explore the world with them and we have to say we came away mightily impressed. There isn't a race in the MMO 'verse quite like them. They aren't born, they're grown underneath a giant majestic tree, and their society seems entirely alien to any other in the game. They share a symbiotic relationship with nature, yet they're almost naive to the world around them. If you're going to choose any race to start *Guild Wars 2* as, go with these guys.

wonderland land filled with fantastic sights, people and a particularly awesome fairground orchestra.

EVERY NOOK AND CRANNY

If you buy into the idea of MMO exploration, where the journey is just as fun as the destination, then *Guild Wars 2* is an experience you must invest in. We haven't enjoyed exploring a world this much for years, and wisely ArenaNet actively encourages this kind of wistless wandering with lower-levelled areas restricting your character's level if you're in an area far beyond your expertise. This allows your character to still earn a hefty amount of XP from public quests and combat while still keeping that element of challenge. Understandably this technique only works downwards and not upwards, so you can't immediately walk into end-game areas, but this feature means that even if you start as a Charr and find yourself far below the level range for the next big story mission, you can hop to Lions Arch via an Asura Gate, head to another race's starter area and keep questing. In other MMORPG's this kind of world savouring is impossible, but in *Guild Wars 2* it's encouraged and leads to a world where everyone is almost equal.

> *"We haven't enjoyed exploring a world this much for years"*

In principle that sounds like a bad thing, but it actually makes the world feel more cohesive, and as world events naturally attract dozens of players into one place, you don't feel as though you're Tyria's only hero. Joined by thousands of others, you feel as though you're part of a unified good-natured effort. Players revive, heal and help each other, purely because it's in their best interest.

During the preview stage ArenaNet and NCsoft made a lot of the world-ending storyline, with the Elder Dragons tearing humanity and other races a superfluous behind, but really that over-arching storyline doesn't really kick in until the later 30 onwards. Instead *Guild Wars 2* follows a much more personal approach with players choosing their character's lineage, key personality traits and faction affiliations during the character creation stage to determine quest paths. This system works brilliantly and results in little-to-no story crossover between the game's five different races – the tiny tech-loving Asura, the battle-hardened Charr, the leafy Slyvari, Human and stern yet spiritual Norn. Each have different personality traits, beliefs and political hierarchies which result in the early storylines at least all feeling relatively unique.

Crossover only really occurs when you choose the same race, but say for the Charr if you align yourself with a different legion, you'll get an almost entirely different early story to your previous character. It's an incredibly

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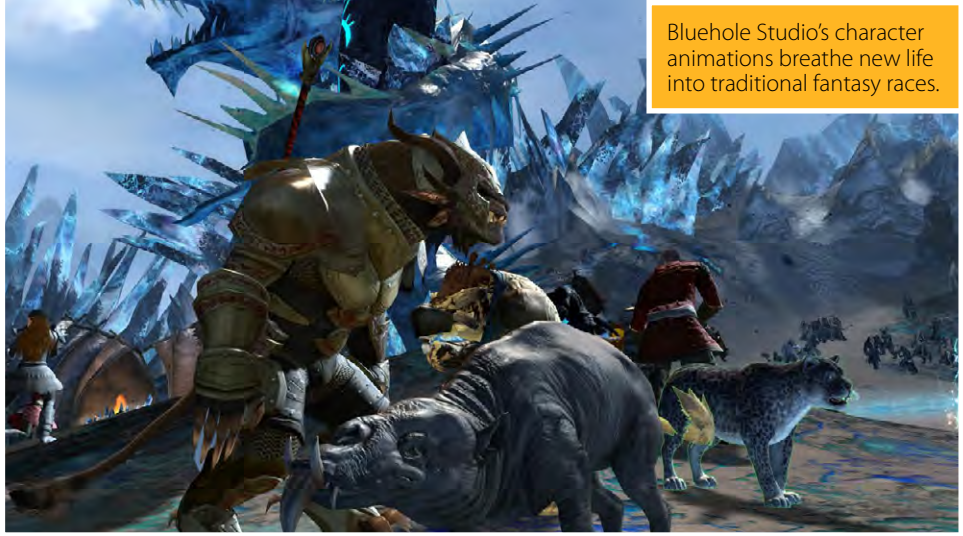


Bluehole Studio's character animations breathe new life into traditional fantasy races.

clever system which at first at least leads you to feel heavily invested in the story. This feeling lessens somewhat as missions soon out-level your own progression, with sequential story missions sometimes separate with a couple of hours or more of public questing but the Hero menu is kitted out with helpful plot synopsis to ensure you don't forget what previously happened.

There are some problems with dialogue and two-dimensional character design with racial archetypes sometimes falling other themselves to be validated, like the Asura being overly snarky or Norn being brave to the point of stupidity, but each story-arc, regardless of player choice, usually has at least a good couple of characters you'll grow an affinity for.

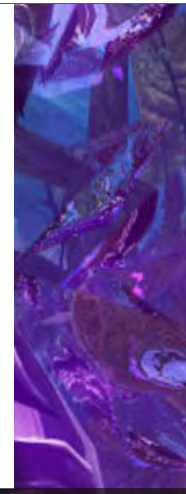
These story issues may be associated with the kind of quest design ArenaNet has gone for with *Guild Wars 2*, as really this is an inherently social experience. Not the kind where you'll be teaming up with players every five minutes, or spamming chat with 'LFG' to get a story quest done – no, it's more of an experience where players just naturally clump together due to public questing. As a result it's hard to pay attention to dialogue after you've gone through the excitement of taking down a 10-story high pile of ooze with 20 other players all spamming attacks into one colourful, albeit slightly confusing, point.

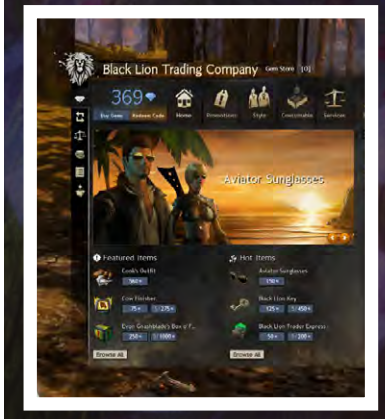
> *"There are some problems with dialogue and two-dimensional character design"*

Ascalon isn't looking too hot. Lion's Arch, on the other hand…

FIGHTING FORM

Simply put, combat in *Guild Wars 2* just feels right. Each of the eight classes has their own unique abilities, even though really you'd think there would be a crossover with the Guardian and the Warrior. The Healer class of





BLACK LION TRADING

At any time players can access the Black Lion Trading Company menu, which allows them to access the auction house, sell items directly to other players or purchase numerous items via the in-game story for gems bought for real money. Experience modifiers, fancy clothes, mini-pets (now dubbed minis) are all purchasable here, but the prices are reasonable. The niftiest part of this functionality is that players can trade in-game gold for gems, at a rate which falls and rises in real-time. This means that any item in the store is within a player's grasp, regardless of whether they have enough real money or not.

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Boss battles are a regular part of public events.

WvsW needs lots of players to feel worthwhile, but if you join battles at the right time then it can feel epic.

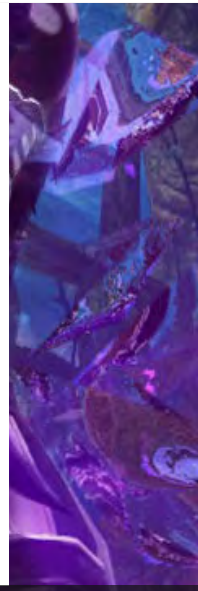
old is gone with each class now possessing its own HP replenishing skill to keep itself safe on the battlefield. The Necromancer, Mesmer, Elementalist, Warrior, and Ranger options return from the first game, now joined by Thief and

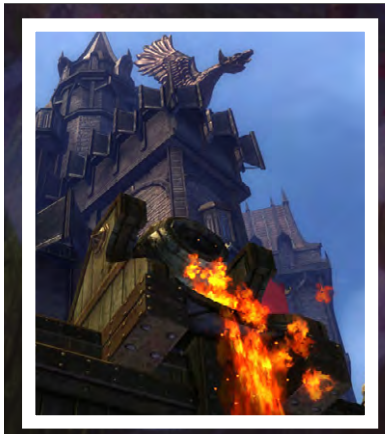
"It isn't surprising that Arenanet hasn't changed the high level combat structure"

Engineer. We tried two different classes, a Ranger and an Engineer, both ranged specialists with the option for close combat, and the combative potential for each career path was far more than we expected. Rather than unlocking skills by visiting a vendor, in *Guild Wars 2* you only gain skills in weapon sets you actually use. The Ranger for instance has scope to use the Longbow and Short bow as before, but those options are joined by Axe, Dagger, Great Sword and Warhorn specialities – all of which boast their own skills which unlock as you use said weapon more and more in combat. This system is easy to understand flexible and again offers more options than you'd find traditionally in standard class-based MMORPGs.

The only problem is that after you've unlocked every skill with every weapon, usually around five each, the progression curve feels a bit stunted as the attribute point allocation system returns from the original game. Sure it's called a different name here, Traits, but you're still guiding your character down a specific path one point at a time with little guidance on whether you're actually following a decent path or not. You only unlock modifiers in this menu, rather than skills, and that initial moment where you go from all you can eat buffet to more regimented options can be a bit daunting.

To compliment the skill modifying Traits and Weapon Skills, there's also Class Skills which for the Ranger were more along the lines of traps, health recouping spirits and other options you'd find in the first game and you unlock these via skill points received either via specific challenges on the map or whenever you gain a level.





WORLD VS WORLD

In addition to regular PvP, *Guild Wars 2* also features a new World versus World game mode which pits hundreds of players against each other in teams on four different giant maps. These battlegrounds are absolutely huge, boasting several castles and supply points which are regularly fought over. It's all about strength in numbers, but to accompany the sieges there's also more sensibly-sized activities like protecting convoys, hunting down AI mobs and other asides to get involved with while dramatic assaults are taking place. Equipment also plays a part with rams, ballistas and other weapons able to be spawned.

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Siege weapons are expensive, but they can turn the tide of WvsW battles.

All of Tyria's seas, lakes and ponds are worth venturing into, as you never know what you may find.

It isn't surprising that ArenaNet hasn't changed the high level combat structure too much, after all the first game garnished such a hardcore PvP following, but a little extra help when making those Trait decisions would definitely be welcome. The new classes, even the more exotic rifle-touting, turret-spawning Engineer, slot into the class roster very nicely though, and surprisingly each character option has enough flair skills to ensure that they stand out on the battlefield. It's a shame the elite skills don't unlock until level 30, but with an increased cap of eight, you can understand why ArenaNet want to keep the good stuff just out of arm's reach initially.

Overall, it's hard to see *Guild Wars 2* as anything other than an extraordinarily complete and polished MMORPG. Straight out of the gate, there's PvP, the new World vs World functionality and a working auction house via the in-game store for players to sink their teeth into.

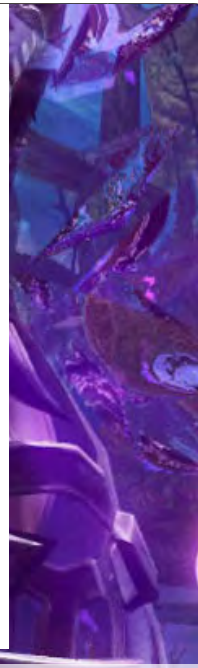
Obviously the sequel has been in development some time, but for any online game to be this feature-complete at launch will make other developers turn green with envy.

> *"NCsoft deserve credit for allowing their Seattle studio to take their time"*

NCsoft deserve credit for allowing their Seattle studio to take their time and honestly the spoils are here for us all to enjoy. That isn't to say that there aren't several areas that need to be improved though, combat can get a little bit too hectic visually with visual effects that occasionally take up the entire screen, the crafting system needs to be explained with a bit more vigour than it is currently, and the lack of a first-person perspective is a mad omission. However that doesn't detract from what is a brilliant experience.

And that isn't factoring in the 'Pay Once, Play Forever' revenue model which is only slightly tempered by the gem store. Paying for an extra bag in your inventory slot and keys to unlock random dropping chests is close to coming off as unscrupulous, but in the grand scheme of things, really isn't anything to kick your PC over.

Guild Wars 2 is the finest MMORPG to be released this year and with the barrier to entry only the price of a regular offline game, frankly you'd be a fool to overlook it. ■



FINAL VERDICT

Big, beautiful and every part the radical MMORPG we've come to expect from ArenaNet

- ⊕ Some of the most beautiful environments to ever grace a game
- ⊕ The new emphasis on public quests enables social play easily
- ⊖ Lack of a first-person camera is a disappointment

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SAVING CITY OF HEROES

A community striving to survive

PUB: NCSOFT
DEV: PARAGON STUDIOS
ETA: SET TO CLOSE 30TH NOVEMBER

Hybrid Hacker is a character I've spent years with on and off and soon him and his electricity powerset will be gone. All that progress and investment just gone, unless somebody swoops in to save the day.

On August 30th, NCsoft announced that their superhero MMO *City of Heroes* was to close within months, alongside the game's developer Paragon Studios. Players around the globe experienced a myriad of emotions, as some were angry, others were stuck in denial and a rare few had a strange feeling of acceptance, as if the service which launched in 2004 had run its natural course. What did we think? Well, on the *MMOZine* staff there is only one person left who still plays *City of Heroes*, so fittingly we asked him what he thought. Here's the result…

FRESH BEGINNINGS

I'm going to miss 'Hybrid Hacker', that was the one thought which swilled around my brain when I heard the news about *CoX* ceasing to be. An alt that I created when I first started playing in 2004; A character I only levelled high enough to be granted the power to fly around Paragon City in style. There were other characters that I hit the level cap with, yet all I could think about was this strange blue spandexed hero from yesteryear and how most likely I would never guide him to establish a nemesis, unlock a new suit or have a bio that's longer than a few lines.

Soon those selfish thoughts gave way to more professional ones, like wasn't *City of Heroes* doing okay? Paragon Studios were a small outfit and their revenue per financial quarter seemed stable and substantial – usually around 2% of overall worldwide sales for NCsoft. Why cut that off now? NCsoft aren't prepping a sequel for release, or working on another superhero MMORPG, so what's the deal?

My take on the situation was shared by others. Even though *City of Heroes* had been around for eight years, forums, Twitter and even *GamerZines* comment fields were overwhelmed with testimonies from players declaring their support for the game. This led to the community galvanising itself into one singular entity, and the 'Save Paragon City' initiative was born. Led by Tony V, this collective is the perfect example of a community utilising a positive approach to try and change hearts and minds. In-game rallies, drives to send hand-written letters to NCsoft's upper echelon, and most notably raise funds to buy

›

"We know that CoX isn't the shiniest, flashiest online universe out there, but it's ours"
Laura Ipsum

"Paragon City is our home, and we're sure going to fight to defend it"
Zeb Marchbanks

dinner for Paragon Studios' former employees. All of these drives were part of the ongoing campaign to get that puzzling decision to quash *City of Heroes* revoked. These kind of tactics are reserved for saving local community hospitals, keeping parks open or rescuing sports clubs in financial difficultly, not saving a community who call a fictional universe home, yet they prove how important MMO communities can become when they flourish.

Even if you don't recognise how good *City of Heroes* is now, or was in its prime, there's something very liberating about a community banding together. The movement isn't about sticking it to the 'man', it's about saving something which a lot of players deem sacred, proving that *City of Heroes* has a committed, vocal and invested audience.

I don't know how big that audience is – NCsoft rarely if ever talk player numbers – but with the information we have about the game's previous financial results

> *"If City of Heroes can be shelved, no MMO is safe"*

and with the online petition to save the service approaching 20,000 signatures, it's clear that this game still has potential. So why close this cherished online-only game then? We don't know, and the sad fact is that we probably never will.

Whatever happens to *City of Heroes*, be it closure, continuation or being sold off to another publisher, one thing is very clear: it's going to be fascinating to observe what happens next to the market. MMORPGs are finite, and we're getting to the point where even the uber-successful ones are nearing the end of their life.

If *City of Heroes* can be shelved, no MMO is safe. We're the first generation of gamers to have to deal with that reality, and make no mistake, the precedent set here will change the genre as we know it. For the sake of 'The Continued Adventures of Hybrid Hacker' I hope the right precedent is set.

To get involved with the 'Save Paragon City' movement head to the Cohtitan.com forums and register your interest now.

"Thank you for your years of support. You've been with us every step of the way, sharing in our challenges, encouraging us to make City of Heroes better, more than everyone else thought it could be. We couldn't have come this far without you."

Paragon Studios

Save City of Heroes Petition: 17,738 signatures and growing

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